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ABSTRACT

Noting that foster care is in a state of flux and that existing systems of foster care are under pressure in many parts of the world, this report extracts lessons regarding the practice of foster care from a range of countries at various stages of economic and social development. The report examines foster care in the context of the family, social networks, the state and nongovernmental organizations, and from the point of view of professional support provided in different contexts. The discussion is set against the backdrop of international human development in which the notion of empowerment of all the stakeholders has gained particular prominence. Recommendations to improve the condition of children in need of foster care include: (1) more attention to preventive measures; (2) establishment of child-friendly public policies; (3) increased focus on personal accounts of foster children; (4) pursuit of a pro-family policy; (5) exploration of social networks for their foster caring potential; (6) increased professionalization of foster care; (7) creation of a research agenda; and (8) enhanced international cooperation in foster care. (Contains 14 references.) (KB)

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STAKEHOLDERS IN FOSTER CARE

AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDY

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1. Introduction: mapping the dynamics[1][2]

Foster care is in a state of flux almost everywhere and existing systems of foster care are under pressure in many parts of the world. In the developed world - which produces the bulk of experience and literature on this topic - the number of children requiring foster care is growing. The nature of children in foster care is also changing - they are becoming more problematic while their birth families are growing more dysfunctional. As foster care families are assuming more functions, foster parents are demanding more support, training and financial rewards, while foster caring is becoming more complex and difficult. As a result, the number of families volunteering for foster care is decreasing. There are also alarming reports about the negative effects of foster care on children. In many countries, concern for the general welfare of children and families at risk is decreasing and the focus is shifting to fire fighting instead.

In developing countries, on the other hand, effective policies for dealing with breakdowns in care arrangements of birth families are virtually absent. There are also strong social taboos that make it difficult to address issues such as child abuse within the family or the community. At the same time, traditional systems of family support and multi-generational families are breaking down due to recession, migration and now HIV/AIDS. This is witnessed by the growing number of children out of families and on the streets. In the former socialist nations, there is a move away from state-controlled institutionalization to foster care and other forms of child- and family support but these countries are grappling with lack of experience in this sphere and a shortage of adequately qualified professionals.

Children's issues are also getting globalise, as was dramatically revealed by the story on 'The Fight over Rwanda's Lost Children' (*Newsweek*, 13 November 2000). Around 90,000 of the children at risk during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda who were hastily flown out to foster homes in France, Belgium and Italy have now been reunited with their families by international relief officials, but some cases remain unsettled. Unaccompanied asylum seeking minors, underage children crossing borders to become models in fashion houses in Europe, and child trafficking off the west coast of Africa are just some other expressions of an ever-extending list of the globalisation of children's issues. What is the expected fate of such countries if large populations of children are not socialized in family homes - and of a global society that includes such countries? These phenomena all have an impact on families and on how parents fulfil their responsibilities towards their children. With all these changes and new expectations, current foster care practices call for a thorough review and assessment in both developed and developing countries, and in the many social contexts within these countries.

Foster care is best understood by examining a wide-ranging and complex network of relationships that are social, cultural, economic and political. A distinction should therefore be made between first and second order foster care. 'First order foster care' refers to the day-to-day responsibility for children in need, and the basic relationship between foster

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[1] This is the shortened version of the, extensively referenced, monograph with the same title written by Shanti George and Nico van Oudenhoven.

[2] We are grateful to Leo Bisschops, Des Gasper, Ivet Pieper, Riet Portengen, and Adrie van Montfoort for useful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

parent and foster child. This personal level includes the foster parent's other children and, increasingly, the foster child's 'natural' parents and siblings. All these actors can be described as *primary stakeholders* with direct personal interest and first-hand involvement in fostering scenarios. 'Second order foster care' denotes a level at one remove from what has just been described and includes individuals and institutions that support and supervise foster cares, for example social workers, doctors, schoolteachers, child welfare agencies and juvenile courts.

This study endeavours to provide new inputs to the debate and practice of foster care and to highlight a few key issues. It will do so by extracting lessons from a range of countries at various stages of economic and social development. Several sources have been used to gather information on foster care and related issues. A special attempt has been made to include literature on foster care experience in developing countries, which tends in general to be informal and undocumented. Foster care will be looked at in the context of the family, social networks, the state and non-governmental organisations, and from the point of view of professional support provided in different contexts. From the outset, the discussion is set against the backdrop of international human development in which the notion of empowerment of all the stakeholders has gained particular prominence. It is further argued that foster care can only be seen in the context of wider child protective and child development measures. Some of these measures are spelt out in the final chapter.

In approaching the issue of foster care, guidance is sought from current thinking on the rights of the child and the 'best interests of the child'. Article 20 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) is of particular salience here:

1. *A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.*
2. *State Parties shall in accordance with their national laws ensure alternative care for such a child.*
3. *Such care could include, inter alia, foster placement, Kafala of Islamic law, adoption, or if necessary placement in suitable institutions for the care of children. When considering solutions, due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background.*

2. Foster care and the family

Foster care is, first and foremost, about families and about changes in families. Beneath all the discussion and practice of foster care lies the outspoken belief that families are essential building blocks of societies and states. Foster care is, therefore, often defined as 'foster family care' or even 'family foster care'. It sees families as the prime mediators and buffers between the child and the community, society and other wider structures. Scrutinising the biological, the adoptive and the extended family will help to promote foster care-like efforts to keep children within family homes, even if these are not their own. Foster care then, naturally, moves into and combines the fields of informal, nonformal and formal care and education of children, probing for elements of support and giving sustenance to other pro-family initiatives. This entails that the definition of foster care - and with it, its policies and

practices - should be wide, elastic and inclusive. A narrow, rigid and exclusive definition will prove to be unproductive and unable to accommodate new developments and challenges to children and families.

The term *biological family* underlines the blood relationship between parents and their children and between siblings. The growing tendency to replace the term 'foster parent' with 'foster carer' parallels the relatively recent emphasis on maintaining ties with the biological parents as a major goal of foster care. Fostering is increasingly seen as complementary to and not substitutive of relationships with biological parents. Here, perhaps, the experience of some Southern countries suggests that social and biological parenthood can be mutually reinforcing rather than competitive. In Zimbabwe, for example, in the majority language Shona, the word for father is *Baba*, father's oldest brother is *Baba Mukuru* (senior father) and father's younger brother is *Baba Mudiki* (junior father): on the mother's side, the parallel terms are *Mai*, *Maiguru* and *Mainini*.

In large parts of the world the basic unit of parents and children is generally part of a wider composite family network. This can be seen, for example, in Guatemala, where children from dysfunctional families first look for a place to stay with their nearest family, then move on to wider family circles and friends and ultimately may opt for the streets.[3] Similarly, in modern societies, the emotionally self-sufficient nuclear family is no longer the norm. What might be called 'post-modern' families are often also partial structures that lock together, merge, co-operate or form networks. For example, single parent families that share childcare or parents who each have children from a previous marriage. At the same time social networks and extended families are eroding and are fragmented especially in situations of poverty or great stress. It is especially in these circumstances that families begin to dysfunction and the lack of extensive family or social networks both hastens the emergence of foster care children and hinders their absorption in existing support structures.

The debate over dysfunctional biological families in some rich societies continues, with questions raised as to whether the money invested in foster care might be better used to strengthen families at risk and thus reduce the need for foster care. Analysts question 'the American tradition of "child saving" but not family preservation' (Courtney 1999: 139) and argue that funds could be more effectively used for prevention rather than cure. The one billion dollars allocated to 'supporting families and preventing out-of-home care' for a five year period in the 1990s is compared with a projected spending of sixteen times that amount on foster care in the same period (*ibid.*: 140). Many industrialised societies that grapple with systems of formal foster care and allocate state funds for this purpose may envy developing countries that seem able to 'keep it in the family', with relatively stable and self-supporting family systems. However, the family in many developing countries can be something of a 'black box' hiding incidents of child abuse, exploitation and violence.

The *adoptive family* has traditionally formed a structurally similar social unit to the biological family, but with the crucial difference that the parent-child relationship is not based on blood ties. Its basis is need, the need of a child for a home and/or of adults for a child. These needs translate into a long-term relationship between adoptive parent and child that mirrors bonds within the biological family, unlike the shorter-term care provided by a foster

[3] See Velásquez de Nitch (2001).

family. At the conceptual level an adoptive family cannot be reduced to a pseudo-biological family, or a foster family to a pseudo-adoptive family. Recently, adoptive families have undergone some changes that make it similar to foster families, notably in the continuing ties - however loose - between children and their biological parents. The differences between adoptive and foster families can blur, as when long-term fostering becomes adoption in all but legal name.

Valid and persuasive arguments for 'permanency' have been put forward by those concerned about children who 'drift' through a series of unsatisfactory foster homes (Parker 1966) without maintaining the deep and steady 'attachment' to a parent or parent figure that is necessary for healthy psycho-social development (Bowlby 1953). However, such arguments are taken too far when foster families in general are seen as 'not good enough' (Rowe *et al* 1984), especially in comparison with biological and adoptive families that allow 'permanency' and 'attachment'. It is likely that a functional biological family is 'best' for a child and that an adoptive family may be 'better' under many circumstances than a foster family, but this is not always the case, for example when prospects for returning to the biological family are open.

Turning to low-income societies, in many of these legal adoption has been relatively easily assimilated but not the idea of *formal* foster care. In Venezuela, for example the concept of foster family care does not exist while legal adoption has existed since 1867. On another continent, in India, the relatively few formal foster parents did not know the difference between adoption and [formal] fostering.[4] This preference for adoption over formal fostering could relate to the greater similarity between adoption and the 'natural' relationships of the biological family. It also illuminates the downside of a strong extended family system, whereby a child either belongs - by blood or adoption - or does not belong. A more likely explanation could be that in low-income countries the state does not have the resources to take responsibility for children at risk by organising formal foster care for them.

Much care of 'other people's children' takes place through the *extended family*, where the 'other' is a familiar person related by blood or marriage. Indeed, some analysts of societies with strong extended family systems see these as pre-empting the need for formal foster care. In the Philippines, for example there is a tradition of looking after an orphaned godchild, a child of a sibling, a cousin or any member of the extended family, while in India the multi-generational and multi-lateral extended family and kinship network provides sufficient psycho-social and economic support to deal with some situations that might otherwise have requried foster care. In Botswana, many women who work in urban areas routinely 'post' their children with relatives in their natal villages. However, in many developing countries the limits to foster care within extended families are being reached. This is happening most pronouncedly in the countries of southern Africa where extended families are undergoing immense strain through supporting large numbers of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, and sometimes disintegrate in consequence. One development is a new form of fostering within extended families, namely foster care by siblings who may not be much older than those they foster. Where both parents have died and grandparents as well, and possibly most parents' siblings, or where relatives cannot or will not take on

[4] Singh 1997: 128, quoting Lalitha 1977.

additional responsibility, the orphaned children may continue to live in their natal home with the eldest sibling, often only in the early teens, in charge. Sometimes this eldest sibling has to drop out of school in order to work the family land or earn income for the household in other ways.

The move to kinship care is one step towards *informal foster care* that takes place largely within a family home, as does formal foster care. Both are unlike care of children in residential institutions. Portengen (2001) and others use the label 'social network' to describe this grey, quasi-familial zone. Comparisons between foster care in Northern and Southern societies become difficult here not only because informal foster is provided both in the North - alongside formal care - and in the South, where it is the predominant form of care. Informal care is, almost by definition, largely undocumented. For this reason, the editors' overview in 'The World of Foster Care' omits informal foster care from its analysis.

Informal foster care may be represented by concentric circles, where biological families are encompassed by extended families that are in turn encompassed by neighbourhoods or networks of caste, religion or class. The reliance here is on informally institutionalised mechanisms to monitor children who are being looked after by adults other than their parents, as in the context of an epidemic whose scale, rapacious progress and social context seems to preclude the setting up of formal mechanisms. Such heavy reliance on informal networks demands exploration of what is actually going on within them, as opposed to what is hoped or feared is going on.

In contrast to informal foster care, *formal foster care* has a shorter history. It denotes formal mandates, supervision and/or support for those caring for children to whom they have no direct obligation; the formal relationship can be with the state or a non-governmental organisation. A positive view of formal foster care is that it emerges out of greater social reflexivity, with explicit agreements to safeguard children tended by unrelated carers. A more negative view is that formal foster care becomes necessary when informal care can no longer be relied upon or fully trusted or when exploitation of children within informal systems outweighs the benefits to them.

Societies have also taken care of children outside the family setting, in institutions specially set up for this purpose. Debates about the relative merits of *institutional care* for children at risk over those of family foster care no longer seem to take place within an oppositional 'either/or' framework. A consensus appears to have been reached that institutional care may be able - once again in terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - to fulfil needs for 'provision' and 'protection'. But it cannot gratify the need for 'psycho-social' well-being in the manner that family life appears uniquely suited to. Nor can institutional life socialise young individuals for the domestic interaction that should characterise later periods in their lives (Kelly 2000: 26). At the same time, not all children can tolerate the intimacy of contact with a foster carer, and they do better in residential care. Some children, because of mental or physical handicaps or severe behavioural or emotional disturbance, are not suited to even specialist foster care programmes. Some people in some cultures feel that an institution is less shameful than a foster home.

Mention should be made of the increasing number of children who live on the streets and fend for themselves. Some of these children live in quasi-familial or pseudo-familial settings

that may be altruistic, exploitative or a combination of the two. It would be perverted to apply the term 'fostering' to such situations, but they do represent a form of provision, protection and psychosocial attachment not otherwise available to such children, especially in settings where institutional care is poorly funded and inhospitable. More positive may be fostering of children on the streets by older street children, often in quasi-sibling relationships. It would also be interesting to find out more about adults who have a loose fostering relationship with a particular child, for example households that provide a child with food, a shopkeeper who allows a child to sleep on the doorstep of his shop or a tea shop owner who keeps leftovers for particular children.

Foster care is increasingly taking on new forms in response to fresh challenges, especially in relation to children with needs that are not just 'special' but 'extraordinary'. Street children do not conform to currently prevalent social definitions of 'childhood' and indeed in some parts of the world they have been hunted down and shot. Children who fend for themselves may not fit easily into conventional foster homes, but that should not preclude experiments with unconventional foster homes.

3. Foster care, the state and non-governmental organisations

Foster care comes to the attention of the state either because the negative aspects of informal foster care clearly outweigh positive aspects, or because the state feels or is made to feel that it must intervene. It may also be that informal arrangements no longer stretch to cover many or most children, and the state has to step in to organise formal foster care. The state has in any case a strong interest in the socialisation of those growing up within it, and in providing policies for religious or civil agencies that place children in foster homes. In recent decades, the rights of the child have been increasingly brought to the state's notice, both by local activists and by such supra-national bodies as the United Nations.

Four different types of states - subsumed under the broad categories of developing countries, former socialist countries, liberal democracies and socialist democracies - and their role in foster care will be looked at. The first two types of states seem largely to act by default. They either do not have the resources or are undergoing such turmoil that they just cannot address the multiple, pressing needs that confront them. The last two categories of countries act largely by design and their foster care systems are grounded in deliberate policies and practices. They also represent different ways in which the state can relate to non-governmental organisations in foster care.

Most *developing nations* leave foster care to informal mechanisms. 'Second order foster care' by the state is insignificant, and NGOs may or may not play a substitutive role here. Even those developing countries that were not colonised, generally treat foster care in a manner that appears continuous with the colonial hands-off approach. Countries as varied as Botswana, Brazil, Guatemala, India, the Philippines, Suriname and Venezuela have little or no legislation pertaining to foster care. At most, a sub-clause of laws governing state guardianship allows the possibility of placement in a foster home with 'fit persons'[5]. In

[5] Cheema 1968, quoted in Singh 1997: 123.

contrast, most of these countries, have explicit legislation concerning adoption[6]. Many take some responsibility through institutional care for children who fall through the safety nets of the extended family and the community, although the institutions they run are notoriously inadequate in number and quality. It is difficult to generalise the role that NGOs play in such settings but religious, caste and similar agencies probably provide safety nets that underlie those of the extended family and provide some second order foster care. In any event, they generate a great deal of voluntary action on behalf of children and families in need.

The *former socialist state* provided no 'second order foster care' as this was incompatible with its philosophy of the state. It was hostile to the traditional institution of the family and tried to take over many of the family's long standing functions. Institutionalisation was the preferred option for children at risk or those needing specialised attention. After the fall of the socialist state in 1989, state attitudes towards the family have altered but coherent policies and institutional arrangements have yet to emerge. Now NGOs are encouraging foster care again, both harking back to some pre-socialist traditions as well as taking cues from policies and practices in the developed world. It remains to be seen whether entrenched traditions of formal foster care in civil society can engage with the state's changed approach to the family, and together provide support for foster care in the first half of the twentieth century.

In contrast, *liberal democracies* have the financial means but not the policies to provide 'second order foster care' through state support to those who foster children at risk - even though these countries' market mechanisms render families vulnerable and exacerbate the need for foster care. Arguments for adoption over foster care are typical of liberal democracies where the state does not wish to take on long-term responsibility for children at risk. Crises of foster care in liberal democracies are not about resources but about attitudes - the attitude of the state and of the dominant social consensus that supports it. Behind such labels as 'family autonomy' and 'positive intervention' may lurk assumptions about the idle/improvident/undeserving poor - and their children - and perhaps even notions about the social survival of the fittest. In these countries, NGOs and voluntary agencies compensate for the gaps in foster care by providing 'second order care'.

Social democracies appear to have the best record in playing a major role in promoting second order foster care. There appears to be some shared political will between the state and NGOs, whereas in liberal democracies NGOs often have to compensate for the state's limited political will. Social democracies seem to use professional staff more effectively and the 'professionalisation of the family' in foster care also seems more advanced. There are often complex chains of foster care, where for example the state supports non-governmental agencies, that in turn support professional networks, that in their turn promote skills in certain families, that in their turn foster children from families at risk and in doing so foster these families themselves. However, social democracies also face many of the political and economic compulsions that liberal democracies do and limits to political will are becoming apparent here as well.

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[6] Mufune *et al* 1997; Singh 1997; Levy and Kizer 1997.

4. Support structures in foster care

Foster care children, although having experienced profound neglect, abuse, abandonment, or trauma, do not stand completely alone, at least, in principle. In the widest sense there is the international community that supports them in various ways. Together, the peoples of the world subscribe and promote adherence to the Convention on the Rights of the Child; and have established organisations such as UNICEF and UNESCO to assist them. They, and other international bodies, have a pivotal role to play in the promotion of information and experience exchange, networking and direct financing of intervention programmes.

In principle, all unprotected children should find a safe haven with the state. Many nations contend that their resources are too limited or their needs too grinding; others seem to have the resources but set different priorities or follow debatable strategies, while some seem to succeed in providing the right climate. The fact is that more can be done for these children in most countries. Five groups in the direct environment of the foster child matter most; the birth parents, their communities, the foster care parents, the professional community and their friends and peers. It has long been the practice to write off birth parents - the first group - completely as any involvement by them was seen as detrimental to the development of the child. It is now being realised that parents can have a great deal to offer and that it serves all parties best to draw them in as much as is possible; and when this does not work to explore the strengths and assets in the wider birth family's network.

When a family breaks down to the point that it can no longer hold its children, other members of the family and social network - the second group – have to step in and come to the rescue. They do this mostly out of concern and genuine interest; but sometimes because there is just no other option as society is defaulting. This is not necessarily a cheaper solution as many costs may be hidden and many people may end up carrying burdens that are unknown to others. It is, however, often a good solution as the creative and caring resources of the extended family are appealed to and optimalised. Governments could play a supportive role here.

The third group, foster care parents, are the designated guardians without whom many children would be far worse off. Their role is changing as the needs of children and their situations become more problematic, and as the demands on them increase. The trend towards their further professionalisation seems unstoppable. Equally unstoppable is the trend to pay them for their services and the awareness that altruism and remuneration are not incompatible.

Social workers are the mediators between foster children, their families and the formal system. Usually underpaid, overburdened, and undervalued, they often perform heroic work in the face of sheer endless misery and hopelessness. Their tasks are changing as well, increasingly they are becoming facilitators or co-ordinators of support teams around the child. In these teams the foster parents and others members of the child's network participate as colleagues in their own right, rather than as amateurs.

Beyond dichotomies between the paid professional social worker on the 'case' and the friend/relative/neighbour who drops by to support, advise and mentor, there is an intermediate category. They are those whose professional positions involve working with

families and who command both formal and informal status. In many societies, the family doctor and the schoolteacher are placed in this situation and they may have inside knowledge about families. In former socialist societies, too, professionals such as doctors and schoolteachers played the role in foster care that social workers do elsewhere. The *supervisory* role or control function of doctors and schoolteachers is often emphasised, as when these professionals are mandated to report suspected abuse of children who are within their purview. Their *supportive* role or care function is widely recognised but less explicitly discussed and bolstered.

Another category of professionals, who play an important role in foster care but are not social workers, are the legal professionals. They are the specialists who frame, modify, apply and sometimes dispute the laws on foster care. There are also those, like the police, whose more general role it is to maintain law and order but who can play a critical role, particularly in crisis situations. The need for collaboration between social workers and related professionals is now formally recognised in many developed nations. Panels consisting of social workers, medical and legal staff often work together, with the social worker in the chair. Foster parents are also increasingly making a case for being present on similar panels and for being treated as a professionals in their own right. This right is indeed being gradually accepted in an increasing number of countries.

Private foster care organisations working for profit are not yet given much attention in the discussion on foster care. Perhaps this is because it seems to contradict, certainly at first sight, all that is good and human about foster care. Yet, similar initiatives have been taken in other social domains and with some considerable success. Illustrations are to be found in nursing homes, schools, medical practice, and vocational training. Commercial undertakings may turn out to be both more efficient and more effective. However, it is crucial that before these commercial organisations are given any assignment, there is absolute clarity about outcomes and the framework of operations. How efficient and necessary are situations where large, understaffed and under-resourced foster care bureaucracies have to be complemented and compensated for by smaller and more effective private agencies, that charge these bureaucracies heavily for their services? Can better-funded state foster care achieve the features that draw foster parents to private agencies? Can volunteers play a role? These questions should certainly be included in discussions on the future of foster care.

The 'professionalisation of the foster family' is another issue that is increasingly coming up for discussion. The average foster carer is not viewed as a professional with special skills and expertise; instead most are seen as doing something that comes 'naturally' - namely, parenting. Yet, parenthood has increasingly become more self-conscious and reflexive and the challenge and demands involved in fostering have increased, with many foster children displaying special needs. Earlier foster carers provided *additional* parenting, extending their efforts and attention to the new entrant to the family. A little kindness and support to a child bereft of its parents performed small miracles. Today, foster carers have to provide *different* parenting, and - in certain cases – provide expert support in caring for and treating children with alcohol and drug addiction, emotional and relational problems, criminal or delinquent behaviour, AIDS, and physical and mental disabilities.

An essential component of 'professional' roles is remuneration for expertise. Foster carers receive reimbursement for their wards' expenses and/or allowances to cover various costs,

although these differ significantly from one country to the next. The issue of payment for routine foster care is however extremely contentious. Some major costs in fostering are not economic, and these cannot be compensated for, although they can be balanced by greater social recognition of the contribution made by foster carers. Many undertake this activity not 'just' for remuneration, but for developing skills and for the rewards accruing from making a social contribution. Given this blurring, why should not foster care be treated as something of a profession and remunerated?

Painfully absent in this text is a discussion of the foster child's friends and peers, the final and most important group providing support to the foster child. It is well known that they, more than any other person, determine a child's and a young person's happiness, attitudes, life and even future, even more so than their [foster] parents. Far too little is known about how foster care children develop and maintain friendships and about the nature of these friendships. Anecdotal information about groups of street children reveal powerful patterns of care of the weak and responsibilities of the strong within these groups. The lack of solid knowledge is a serious omission in the debate on foster care children, an omission that has not been rectified here either.

6. Foster care: can we do better?

Concern is often expressed - and justifiably - over the less than optimum performance of children who grow up in foster care, as compared with those raised in their own families or who were adopted. A measure frequently cited is poor performance at school, but also weak emotional stability, ill health and lower employment rates and levels are mentioned. Nonetheless, it must be recognised that foster care has many achievements to its credit, especially when compared with the alternatives of institutional care or children fending for themselves.

Foster care as it is presently organised is a holding operation, but a vital one for society. Foster parents conduct this holding operation, often with insufficient state and professional support. They deal with children who are more and more likely to have special and even extraordinary needs and problems. The holding operation is under tremendous stress and is itself at risk. Even to maintain it at current minimal levels demands increased investment, let alone trying to upgrade the operation for the benefit of foster children, foster carers and society. Politicians, policy makers and taxpayers should consider the implications if the sagging, fraying rope in the holding operation of foster care will sooner or later give way.

Coming to the end of this international survey, what are the lessons that have been learned that can be used to move forward the practice and the debate on foster care? Can social services - underfunded and understaffed as they tend to be - be stretched over inexorably rising levels of need? Can the increasing numbers of children at risk be balanced by shrinking pools of foster carers and resources? Is there common ground that can be shared by all, regardless of where they live or work? Can we do better?

There are numerous ways – some of which have been broached or hinted at during the course of this text – in which things could be made better for children in need of foster care. Some of these are contingent on the availability of financial resources. Most of them, however, seem to

require a special mindset, a particular way of looking at children and at families. For example, what is the value that society puts on children? Does it consider families to be more important than profits? Is there a shared belief that all children deserve access to the same entitlements? In this section we offer some guidelines for setting such a process in motion.

Preventative measures

Internationally, little attention is given to the prevention of family dysfunction. Instead, the bulk of funds available for child welfare are spent on repairing the damage once it occurs. The theme of societal reform as an important element in reducing the numbers of children in need of foster care has been put forward by many practitioners and researchers but has not yet found wide recognition at the policy level. In the majority of countries the focus is still on dealing with children who come to the attention of welfare or child protection agencies.

One promising approach to reducing the need for foster care is to reflect on what children need for healthy growth and development and what roles the family and community can play in providing for these needs. In the main, children fare reasonably well if their basic needs are met, regardless of the specificity of their environment. The immediate implications of these views is that where children 'at risk' are concerned, efforts should be made to 'normalise' conditions, that is, to ensure that children are safe, get proper health care, are fed, can play, and interact regularly with at least one reliable adult. The increasing awareness of the importance of the 'average, good environment' for the development of children offers policy makers two complementary strategies. The first is to establish 'reasonable, average environments' for all children, and the second is to try to actually reach individual families at risk. The former allows for general policy interventions such as the provision of good education, family support, employment, health and counselling, access to support networks and recreation. The latter allows for direct support to families and children in the form of parent education groups and play groups for toddlers.

Parents, too, need an 'average, good environment' to function well. Most parents are good at finding the right resources and facilities for their children, but they too stop functioning adequately when environment puts extraordinary pressures on them. The capacity of parents for supportive, consistent and involved care can easily be diminished by profound psychological distress, poverty, isolation, discrimination, ill health, or poor or non-existent marital bonds. Thus policies for the prevention of child negligence should be concerned not only with the dysfunctional families, but equally with maintaining or repairing the social fabric of society as a whole.

Towards child friendly policies

Any policies directed at supporting families and preventing the need for foster care should first address the way that society treats its children in general. In other words, what are the perceptions of childhood, of the needs and rights of children? What obligations do parents, families and communities have? How and where does the responsibility of the state come in? And most importantly, to what extent are individuals inclined to accept that what their own children deserve, applies to other children as well? The acceptance of the idea of solidarity and empathy with children across kin, social and ethnic boundaries is fairly recent and is

embodied in the universally accepted Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). For the first time in history, there is a solid set of protective principles that apply to all children, everywhere.

However, in spite of the general acceptance of the Rights of the Child, a number of world-wide trends counteract the establishment of a child-friendly climate. One of these is globalisation that tends to bring prosperity to those who are in favourable positions but makes the weak, many among whom are children, more vulnerable. For example, many small communities that used to have adequate childcare facilities are collapsing, as their local economies cannot connect with the global economic forces.

In general, the interests of the child do not feature prominently in policy pronouncements, not are policies gauged according to their capacity to take children's interests into account. In most instances, policies are assessed in terms of their economic benefits and, reluctantly of late, of their impact on the environment. The question that should be raised with any policy issue is simple: what does it mean for children? The idea is not altogether strange. Nepal, for example, has made children's development the focus of its national development plan.[7] Brazil has developed a similar policy. As these countries are not immune to violations of children's rights, these steps are especially noteworthy as they show the states' commitment to make their societies friendlier for their children.

Move children to centre stage

In all discussions on foster care, pride of place should be given to the main actors: the foster care children. They are easily taken for granted with the spotlight shifting to welfare institutions, state structures, professional frameworks, and foster carers. Foster care children are not merely statistics, or victims and thus objects of pity to be ministered to by individuals and organisations. They are also protagonists in their own right and have agency within the structures described. It is for this reason alone that their views, as well as of those who are close to them, should be taken on board in decision-making about their lives and future.

Personal accounts from foster children reveal the sense of being apart, other and different. Sharing their experiences with each other may mitigate this, and may even provide more positive 'it's all right to be a foster child' attitudes. It is not suggested that foster children should band together to the exclusion of other ties - after all, it is to avoid ghetto-like situations that they are in foster care and not in institutions. But they should be encouraged to draw strength from each other. Feelings of tensions between foster children as well as solidarity can be some of the problems that are addressed in group discussions.

Magazines on the lines of *Foster Care Youth United* provide a forum in which to air and share experiences of various kinds. They can enable foster carers, biological parents, social workers, administrators and policy makers to read about the realities and perceptions of those whose lives they are trying to enhance. Biographical material by foster children and foster parents, in

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[7] The 11 December 1996 issue of *Rising Nepal* reports that representatives from government agencies and NGOs all agreed that 'the child development programme should be made the focal point of national development and on the need for formulating effective and concrete programmes through clear-cut policy in this regard'.

particular, are useful as they offer a wealth of recognition and practical advice[8]. Undoubtedly, the Internet will also grow in importance as a vehicle for communication between these groups and give, at least some of them, a sense of belonging. Of interest here is an investigation into why some American children preferred to live on the streets instead of in a foster home. The reasons included 'a sense of having control of their lives', 'peer loyalty' and 'a sense of community'[9].

Pursue a pro-family policy

The discussion on foster care is a long statement in support of the family as a social institution. Thus, such arguments as are heard from affluent constituencies in the USA to return to large-scale institutionalization - for a population of children in care who are increasingly from poor and minority backgrounds - must be countered. Yet, the functionality of families is contingent on the social and political context and the increasing tenuousness and instability of families in many countries is a major source of concern. Comparative studies have shows that negatives outcomes in children may have less to do with the breakdown of the traditional family and more to do with a lack child-focused policies.

Foster families are best viewed within the framework of family systems, across the societies of the world today and throughout history. Such an overview shows that:

- Many debates on family foster care polarise alternatives that should instead be grouped together in order of desirability and feasibility. Thus, rather than argue about family preservation *'versus.'* foster care, family preservation should be seen as the preferred option, and foster care as a follow-up strategy where children have to be accommodated away from their parents for a short or long period.

- In order to understand both the continuing and changing role of family foster care, the thinking has to move beyond models of the family that are narrow and self-enclosed. Traditions of 'composite parenthood' and 'composite families' in various parts of the world can provide valuable insights.

Explore and exploit social networks

Many developing as well as developed societies have strong traditions of informal and non-formal foster care. Formal foster care could learn from these approaches and build on them. This principle comes to the fore in the notion of 'social network foster care' as elaborated by Portengen (2001). The starting point for her is that the family and its network of other family members, friends and acquaintances, harbour a great reservoir of positive forces. These forces, when properly used and nurtured, are capable of dealing with dysfunctional families and with taking care of their children. These networks should be explored for their foster caring potential and the voices within them networks should be listened to and taken

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[8] See for example '*Do You Want To Be A Foster Parent?* by Sharon Davis (1998).

[9] Holdaway and Ray 1992, cited in Curran and Pecora 1999: 114.

seriously. Rather than looking for defects, assets should be identified and used as elements to reconstruct a healthy environment. Empowerment of all the key players, including the parents of the child, and forging alliances and networks are crucial strategies and objectives. The formal welfare system should be part of this alliance and network. Welfare professionals should position themselves not as all-powerful, all-knowing experts, but rather as specialists bringing to the debate specific knowledge and skills that reinforce, facilitate and accommodate the experience and expertise of the 'colleague specialists' from the social network of the foster child. Their relationship should be one of mutual learning and exploration; it should be governed by deep sentiments of equality and partnership.

Naturally, familiarisation with new ideas and practices is more easily attained in countries with extensive networks and many mature civil organisations; Sweden being a prime example. However, even in poor communities there is no limit to innovation and human ingenuity and there as well, or rather most probably there, social network foster care is the most feasible way. Success then will largely depend on the wider community - including that of the international donors - which should recognise, validate and support this approach to foster care.

Support professionalisation of foster care

The recommendation that social and family networks be thoroughly explored implies a shift of emphasis from working within formal systems to informal and non-formal environments. This involves an extension or an addition to the work rather than doing away with formal and professional structures. Further professionalisation is unavoidable if this means the attainment of higher quality, a deeper understanding of the issues, more experienced care workers and foster parents, better policies, access to richer networks and increased skills of all concerned.

The term 'profession' cannot be divorced from remuneration, although in the case of foster care this requires entering delicate and emotive ground. While fostering should certainly not be a money-spinner, hardworking and dedicated foster carers should not bear the costs of ensuring the socialisation of children who have to leave their birth homes. If other 'altruistic' professions are remunerated, why not foster care? Those who foster today do not make use of the economic value of labour contributed by foster children, as was done in earlier eras. At the same time, opportunity costs increase as growing numbers of women take up paid work outside the home, and self esteem and social recognition are more and more dependent on at least some earning power. In any case some of the heaviest costs in fostering are not economic: they can therefore not be reimbursed, but they can - to some extent - be offset. If foster care is increasingly 'professionalised' in almost all ways except that of remuneration, its future is certainly in jeopardy.

Create a research agenda

At present, most investigations and research data on foster care originate in USA, the UK and a few other Western Nations and this study has drawn heavily on this information. It has helped to clarify many issues and bring structure to the wide and rich activities and policies of foster care. Much of this research can and is actually used as a powerful tool for planning,

programming, policy, and advocacy purposes. In developing countries, where this tool is especially needed, research on foster care is virtually non-existent. There is a pressing need for research of a fact-finding nature. What is happening, why, in what manner and to what end, are the principle questions that need to be asked and that can be answered in a fairly straightforward manner. Interviews, participant observation, and group discussions appear to be productive ways of getting access to valuable insights. This type of research is not expensive and - with some supervision – is within the purview of many university graduates with enquiring minds.

The International Federation of Foster Care Organizations (IFCO) should take an active stance here and assist countries in setting up these data systems. Currently, such a system called the 'Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System' (AFCARS) is being introduced in the USA. It has been constructed to collect information on issues such as demographic background of foster children, removal and placement indicators, current placement setting, case plan goal, principal care taker, foster family parent, sources of federal support and outcomes. States are required to report on all children under their supervision twice a year (Collins 1999). Although the level of sophistication of AFCARS will be hard to emulate in low-income countries, there is no reason to forgo the implementation of a useful data collection system.

Promote international co-operation in foster care

In the main, direct international interventions in the child policies of a particular country are rare. A recent exception is the pressure exerted by the European Union on Romania to upgrade its child policies and practices and as such ease the way to European Union membership. Globalisation of children's issues may press the international community into action to mitigate the worst excesses of processes that it has itself set in motion. International development assistance should, however, not be seen as a form of altruism, but rather as an expression of enlightened self-interest. In the ultimate analysis, genuine development work is in the benefit of all humankind.

Is the global community ready for large-scale second order foster care that crosses national - and even continental – borders and to engage in a genuine partnership? Whether the community is ready or not is difficult to answer, however, there is no doubt that it could be done.

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